

# Chapter 1

## So You Want to Play the Flute

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding the nature of this magical instrument
  - ▶ Appreciating the flute's great legacy
  - ▶ Getting started with flute playing
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I came to the flute in a pretty roundabout way — when I was 10 years old, the obligatory question came as to which instrument I'd like to play. I had played the recorder when I was six or so, and I had really enjoyed that, so I figured that woodwinds, such as the flute or the clarinet, would be my instruments of choice. They looked a little like the recorder, anyway, so I suppose that I found some comfort in that similarity. Well, my parents got a hold of two used instruments to try out: a flute and a clarinet. We took the instruments to a woodwind repair technician, who informed us that the clarinet was in a pretty bad state of disrepair, but the flute was in perfect condition. Hence, my musical future was decided for me.

I didn't know how a flute worked — I thought you were supposed to blow into the end of it, like a recorder. I wondered whether the flute wasn't broken, after all — until a neighbor kid who played the flute showed me that you were supposed to blow *across* the hole, not directly into it. Talk about an “aha” moment. From that point on, I gradually grew more and more obsessed with playing the flute. After a while, my parents couldn't get me to *stop* practicing. Before I knew it, I was majoring in music in college.

Maybe you've still got a flute that you used to play in high school, and you'd like to dust it off and start playing again. Maybe you've attended concerts or listened to recordings, and you've fallen in love with the way the flute sounds. Or maybe you just stumbled upon it like I did when I was a kid. Whatever brings you to the flute, I'd like to welcome you to this exciting and rewarding instrument and the adventures it promises — I hope you enjoy playing as much as I do, and that it brings you years of joy and accomplishment.

## What, Exactly, Is a Flute?

For the purposes of this book, I'm talking about the instrument generally called the *western concert C flute*, shown in Figure 1-1, which is the same one that you see in any band or orchestra. (For an overview of flutes other than the western concert C flute, see Chapter 22.) This flute is based in the key of C, is usually made of metal, and is made up of three separate sections that you put together. (I talk more about the different parts of the flute in Chapter 2.)

**Figure 1-1:**  
The flute.



Basically, a flute is a hollow tube that produces sounds when the player makes the air inside of it vibrate by blowing across a hole, hitting the opposite edge of the hole to split the airstream. (If you've ever tried to get a sound by blowing across the top of a pop bottle, you already have a pretty good idea of what I'm talking about.) All flutes make sounds according to this simple principle.

The modern Boehm system flute, which is just another name for the western concert C flute, has holes in the tube and keys on top of those holes. (See Chapter 2 for more about Theobald Boehm and the modern key system.) The flutist can play many different pitches by depressing or lifting the keys. (I talk more about the keys' function in changing the pitches in the section about the harmonic series in Chapter 2.)

The flute's range is about three and a half octaves. The notes you play most of the time, though, are within about a three-octave range. (I include all the notes within the flute's full range in the basic fingering chart, which you can find in Appendix A.)

## The Legacy of the French Flute School

The way flutists play today is largely the product of something called the French Flute School, which was centered around the Conservatory in Paris, France (*Paris Conservatoire*). French flutist and teacher Paul Taffanel (1844–1908) gets much of the credit for being the driving force behind the French Flute School, but other flutists and teachers who had preceded him had also set the stage for the proliferation of flute-playing style and discipline that followed. Around the beginning of the 20th century, Taffanel and his students at the Paris Conservatoire were doing some groundbreaking things with the Boehm system flute. They practiced to play the challenging new pieces being written for them by creating many different scale and arpeggio exercises that

flutists still use today. (See more about scales, arpeggios, and the Taffanel–Gaubert *Daily Exercises* (Leduc) in Chapter 17.)

Expressive, beautiful playing was an important part of Taffanel’s approach as a flutist and teacher. People who heard him play said that no one had ever matched the beauty of his sound. In Taffanel’s teaching studio, demanding technical exercises were essential to playing the repertoire, but expression and communication, governed by the flutist’s breath and sound, were paramount. And thanks to Taffanel’s writings and his teaching legacy, this distinctive style and feeling for the music itself is still at the heart of what flutists strive for today.

## Playing the Flute

One of the many reasons that people are attracted to the flute is that it’s fairly easy to start playing it. After you get comfortable with producing a sound (see Chapter 6), you can start working on the fingerings, and you’ll be able to play quite a few notes in pretty short order (see Chapters 8 and 9).



The tricky part isn’t just playing the flute — it’s playing the flute *well*. And why bother playing it badly when, by putting in just a little bit more time and effort, observing the advice I give you in this book, and using powers of self-observation, you can ultimately get a far more pleasurable result?



Although you may be tempted to skip the sections on breathing and posture in Chapter 5 or my advice on balancing the flute in Chapter 7, read through these sections anyway, whether you’ve played the flute before or not. If you’re a beginner, these points are absolutely essential to your playing. And if you’re not a beginner, these points are absolutely essential to your playing — you may think you already know what you’re doing with breathing, posture, and holding the flute to some extent, but I give you a few tricks that I’m willing to bet will be new to you.

If you already have some playing experience, you may want to skip ahead to Part III after you review the basics in Chapters 5 and 7. But go ahead and review the information on overblowing to the next octave in Chapter 11 as well. Here, I give you some important hints about how to maintain a good sound quality as you go up to the higher notes.

Once you’ve been playing for a couple of years, you’ll find the advanced practice techniques in Part IV helpful. But don’t shy away from Part IV if you’re not an advanced flutist yet — in Chapters 18 and 19, you get lots of information on finding a teacher, playing in ensembles, performing, and (last but not least) maintaining and caring for your instrument.

## Gathering the Tools of the Trade



What does it take to play the flute, besides just the desire to do it? Well, in Chapter 5, I give you a list of tools you need besides your flute to get started. I also recommend a couple of other necessary prerequisites that you don't have to go out and buy:

- ✓ **Passion:** Passion goes along with the desire to play the flute, of course. In order to have the motivation to practice daily, you've really got to *want* to do it. Of course, life is full of distractions, and you won't feel like getting the flute out of the case every single day, but if you have a general, unflagging passion for the flute and for music, it sure makes it a lot easier to devote your time to practicing, even on days when you're not really in the mood.
- ✓ **Commitment:** In order to progress on the flute, or on any instrument, for that matter, you've got to dedicate a certain amount of uninterrupted time to it each day. Carving out practice time isn't always easy to manage, but you need to do it if you want to keep getting better. (See Chapter 5 for more on practice time.) If you commit to playing the flute, schedule your practice time, and set realistic goals you can follow through on, you're well on your way.
- ✓ **Your ears:** Use them every time you practice or play and really listen to yourself carefully. Let your ears be your teacher!
- ✓ **Talent:** A little talent goes a long way. I define *talent* as innate ability. Some people seem to have that special "something" when it comes to music. But believe it or not, talent can actually be a hindrance — if an enormously talented person thinks that talent can substitute for daily practice, that person can crash, burn, and burn out pretty readily. Consider the famous Thomas Edison quotation: "*Genius is 1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.*" Substitute "talent" for "inspiration" and "practice" for "perspiration," and you've got about the right ratio for success in mastering a musical instrument.

Marcel Moyse, one of Taffanel's star pupils, wrote this bit of advice in his book, *De la Sonorité* (Leduc): "*It is a matter of time, patience, and intelligent work.*" (For more on Taffanel, see the section "The Legacy of the French Flute School," earlier in this chapter.) Moyse's student and well-known teacher Trevor Wye refers to this quotation time and time again in his *Practice Books for the Flute* (Novello). I find myself quoting it to my students regularly, and I'm sure many other teachers do the same. It's a simple concept, but incredibly important to remember during your musical travels. (For more on Marcel Moyse and Trevor Wye, see Chapter 17.)